The Fourth Church Pulpit

A CIVIL RELIGION

May 12, 1996

John M. Buchanan

Lord, behold our family here assembled. We thank you for this place in which we dwell, for the love that unites us, for the peace given us this day, for the hope with which we expect the morrow; for the health, the work, the food, and the bright skies that make our lives delightful; for our friends in all parts of the earth.

Give us courage and gaiety and the quiet mind. Spare to us our friends, soften to us our enemies. Bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavors; if it may not, give us the strength to endure that which is to come; that we may be brave in peril, constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath and in all changes of fortune and down to the gates of death, loyal and loving to one another. Amen.

"For a Family"
Robert Louis Stevenson

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
John 14:15-21
1 Corinthians 14:26-33, 37, 40

"... all things should be done decently and in order."
1 Corinthians 14:40 (NRSV)

One of my saints is the late James Reston who was born in Scotland, educated at the University of Illinois, became a newspaper reporter and journalist for many years before his retirement and was executive editor and Washington Bureau Chief for the *New York Times*. It was Reston's column that induced me always to try to read the editorial page of the *New York Times* before stepping into the pulpit. He wrote with clarity and intelligence about all the major issues of my lifetime and maintained what, to me, has always seemed a high standard for any public figure — just the right combination of conviction and civility, strong opinions, deeply held, but also respect for the person who does not share your convictions.

I was delighted to discover in his fine book, *Deadline*, a reference to Fourth Church and its pastor, Harrison Ray Anderson. Reston and his wife were traveling back to New York by train after the 1956 Republican Convention in San Francisco, which renominated Eisenhower. In the dining car they joined "a minister from the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. He was a warm supporter of Ike and thought I had written too negatively about the president. As we were leaving the dining car he surprised me by asking if I still read my Bible. I said I did, occasionally. 'Well', he said, 'when you get home, look up the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Luke, the first to the third verses.' 'What's your point?' I asked him. 'Never mind,' he replied, 'just look it up.' So when I got home I did so and then understood his meaning, for the passage read:

> 'And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And behold there was a man named Zacchaeus ... And he sought to see Jesus ... and could not for the press ...'" (James Reston, *Deadline, A Memoir*, New York, Random House, 1991, p. 468)

Reston got a good laugh out of Anderson's gentle critique.

I did something I do not ordinarily do when I read that. I wrote to Reston, told him the minister's name and something about him, told him that I was the current minister of that same church and went on to tell him that part of my Sunday morning ritual for years had been reading his column.

He wrote back:

> "I appreciate what you have said about my writing. Actually you and I are in the same business. I am grateful that you can take the boy out of Scotland but you can't take the Church of Scotland out of his mind."

I loved the civility of the man. At the end of his book he reflects on the character of his parents, and his mother who died at the age of 98, with such grace that I thought I'd share a bit with you, it being Mother's Day, even though it has nothing much to do with the rest of the sermon.

> "Even in her nineties, my mother still had strong views. She's still news in my mind because, unlike most mortals, she never seemed to be plagued by doubts, and the older she got the surer she was of her answers. Her view was that all this progress was only wickedness going faster. She always knew, she said, that life would be no daisy. The great thing about the Presbyterians, she thought, was that they expected so little that they were always ahead of the game ...

> On more worldly questions, she had equally strong convictions. For example, she was not at all in sympathy with the women's liberation movement. They didn't go nearly far enough for her. She didn't want equality with men, but authority over them. Most men, in her view, were spoiled and willful children who would go to the bad unless policed by some good woman and the church." (p. 46)

It was Reston's passing references to church and religion that moved me. As he, his wife and sons settled in Washington after the war Reston wrote:

> "Sally and I tried in those increasingly secular days to rescue for our children something of the religious faith of our parents .... not intolerance and insistence on conformity. But we did believe in many of the things often associated with the Christian religion, not the crust of self-righteousness, but consideration for others, self-discipline and common courtesy." (p. 248)

There it is — in the mind and heart of this very civil man. Christian religion is associated with consideration for others, common courtesy, bedrock civil virtues.

The topic is Civil Religion, or perhaps more accurately, a religion which is characterized by civility. The text is from Paul's letter to a bunch of Christians who were behaving most uncivilly toward one another, and the context is the tragic propensity of all religion to sacrifice civility in the name of conviction.

One of my favorites poems by one of my favorite poets, Phyllis McGinley, is "How to Start a War":

> "Said Zwingli to Muntzer ..." (Zwingli and Muntzer were two 16th Century leaders of the Protestant Reformation who disagreed vigorously on the mode of baptism, sprinkling - Zwingli, or total immersion - Muntzer.)
>
> "Said Zwingli to Muntzer
> 'I'll have to be blunt, sir,
> I don't like your version
> of Total Immersion
> And since God's on my side
> And I'm on the dry side,
> You'd better swing ovah
> To me and Jehovah'
>
> Cried Muntzer, 'Its schism,
> Is infant Baptism!
> Since I've had a sign, sir,
> That God's will is mine, sir,
> Let all men agree
> With Jehovah and me,
> Or go to Hell, singly,'
> Said Muntzer to Zwingli,
>
> As each drew his sword
> On the side of the Lord."
>
> (Phyllis McGinley, *Times Three, Selected Verse*, New York, The Viking Press, 1960, p. 28)

The topic is relevant always, even from the very beginning. The tiny Christian community in the Greek City of Corinth, in the year 50 A.D., had its hands full. It wasn't very large or powerful or influential. In fact, it was tiny,

weak, fragile. The intelligentsia of Corinth thought the whole thing was foolish, ridiculed the basic beliefs of the Christians as patent nonsense. The Christians had, in addition, worn out their welcome in the local Synagogue and had set up a small house church next door. They had plenty to worry about and lots to do just to maintain their fragile toehold in that hostile environment. And instead of tending to business, instead of devoting themselves to living faithfully and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, they were expending all of their energy on fighting one another, not even treating one another with common decency and courtesy, and in the process making a public spectacle of themselves.

It all sounds so distressingly contemporary. The conflicts in Corinth were first of all theological or ideological, a split between conservatives, liberals and moderates. Paul deals with the theological integrity and wholeness of the church in the opening chapter of the letter. Next he turns to a second kind of factionalism, this one based on how people were practicing their ideology and their behavior in worship.

Some people in Corinth were engaging in the ancient and mysterious practice of ecstatic speech, or speaking in tongues, a practice today in Pentecostal Churches. Paul himself, apparently did it on occasion. The problem was that not everyone had this gift and because of the very nature of the phenomenon it made the public meetings and worship services of the little church fairly chaotic. You could, apparently, see and hear the disunity of the church just by attending worship.

So, like a patient parent, Paul instructs, speaking in tongues is fine, but it's more appropriate as a private practice. When you come together for worship, defer to one another; let everything build up the church.

And — I love this — take turns. Be quiet when someone else is speaking. Pretty basic stuff.

And then there's a paragraph I did not read, it being Mother's Day and I being a prudent man, about women refraining from speaking in church. It appears in parentheses in the NRSV. In early manuscripts it appears at the end of the section and seems clearly to be a marginal note, added later, and not part of the original letter. There is no doubt that the church in the first centuries became increasingly patriarchal, hierarchical and masculine under the strong influence of Roman culture. There can also be little doubt that Paul reflects his own culture's biases and customs, and that within his own thinking there is deep conflict between the kind of radical equality which inspired him to write "In Christ there is neither male nor female," and then, here, the rhetoric of male domination and female submissiveness. Whatever those parentheses meant in 1st Century Corinth, it is the judgment of most churches that it is not relevant and is in fact wrong in the contemporary situation.

The section ends with a phrase that is particularly dear to Presbyterians — in fact we have claimed it as our own: "Let everything be done decently and in order."

There is in Paul's thought a new and important concept, namely that this new phenomenon called church, based on belief in God and a promise to follow Jesus, can survive only if it finds some basis for its life other than every individual's personal theological preference and personal style. There must be some common ground, some notion of a "common good," and a willingness to defer one's own individuality in order to serve that common good. What Paul is approaching here is a new basis for community, the voluntary deferring of one's individuality for the good of the group.

It is the very heart of the notion of a free society, not based on authoritarianism or coercion, but common consent. In civil society — a civilization — people must agree to behave civilly, to defer to one another, to uphold and preserve a common good, a truth I ponder every time I drive through traffic on Michigan Avenue.

The problem is frequently that people of faith become convinced that their personal preferences and opinions are so important that the common good may be sacrificed. "The committed lack civility and the civil lack conviction," Martin Marty quipped. (*By Way of Response*, p. 81)

In point of fact, the great temptation of all religion has always been to regard its truth as the only truth. "There is nothing so fearsome," Lord Acton is said to have observed, "as a lone Calvinist in possession of the truth." And Oliver Cromwell, arguing with stubborn Scots Presbyterians, pleaded, "I beseech ye, by the bowels of Christ, think it possible that ye may be mistaken?"

Some of our best and most creative thinkers are saying that the most important item on the nation's agenda is a recovery of "the common good." It is becoming clear that if there is no value other than the rights of the individual, there is not much to hold us together as a people. If the right to own and carry a concealed handgun is more important than the safety and security of a society, we can, I suppose, expect more traffic arguments to be resolved in shootouts in the intersection, as has happened several times already.

An important book, Amitai Etzioni's *The Spirit of Community*, argues that an economy and a society cannot exist for long if its major value is self-interest. "It's time," he wrote, "to push the pendulum back to a new emphasis on 'we,' the values we share, the spirit of community."

Paul argued that in church "all things should be done decently and in order" that the little church ought to be and to model a civil society. For Paul it is not merely a way for an organization to be in the world. It was a way to represent and live out the radical newness and goodness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is something new here and he desperately wanted his friends in Corinth to know it and show it to the world. It was for him a theological issue, finally, a faith issue.

The way the church behaves, the way Christian people relate to other people, is the best image of Christian truth. And so it has always been. When the world looks at the church and sees a contentious, rigid, exclusive organization, intolerant, disrespectful of other people, it does not see much of the truth of God and it is, understandably, not much interested.

David Read said it eloquently:

> "The salvation brought by Christ means much more than an escape from hell and promise of heaven. It has to do with the discovering here on earth of all that reflects the goodness, truth and beauty of the God who made us." (*The Faith Is Still Here*, p. 69)

Jesus himself modeled a life of civility. He cared deeply about the welfare of the human beings around him in a time and place where life was short and often brutal. He seemed to accept at face value all the men and women he encountered, and in his personal graciousness swept aside the accumulation of prejudice and religious exclusiveness of his culture. He seemed to treat with compassion all the people who came to him. He seemed to extend respect and simple kindness to the little children, to the elderly, to the sick and the poor and the discouraged. There was, I conclude, as much compelling power about his way — his gentle grace — his civility — as in the intellectual truth of his teaching. He showed the world what someone called an "infinite courtesy."

It is that to which you and I, and his individual disciples, and also as his people, his church in the world are called.

Last Wednesday evening I was privileged to be a guest at a very civil occasion. It was a candlelight dinner in a dining room with white tablecloths and small bouquets of flowers at each table. The other guests were boys and girls from Cabrini-Green and the Henry Horner Homes who participate in our tutoring program. The occasion was Kids' Cafe, the nutritious hot meal we are able to provide before every tutoring program, with the support of the Quaker Oats Company. I was ushered to my seat at a table with Melvin, 7th grade, Victoria, 1st grade, Shaneeka, 6th grade and 3 or 4 other youngsters.

The children were unusually quiet. When I tried to start a conversation, Victoria, age 6, put a finger to her lips and said "Shhh. If you'll be quiet, maybe they'll let our table go first." When we went through the buffet line, we were helped by other students and volunteers. All my table mates said "please" and "thank you." We sat down and

again my friends said, "please pass the bread," and "please pour my milk," and "please help me open the butter." Only when the dessert arrived was there a moment when decorum was at risk as each youngster elected ice cream over green beans.

The prayer, offered by one of the leaders, was strong. Inviting us — ordering us — in her strong voice to be quiet and to bow our heads and shut our eyes and fold our hands and come quietly into the presence of God, she prayed:

> "Lord thank you that we are here. Lord, thank you that we are safe. Lord thank you that our families are safe tonight."

It was an eloquent reminder that safety is a priority and a blessing for my friends. And the whole event reminded me of the passage I had been studying and trying to make sense of all day: Paul urging his friends to be civil, considerate, to take turns, to defer to one another, not only because it is a way to survive, but also because it reflects something of the beauty and goodness of God and the compassion and justice of Jesus. And I thought about how hopeful this modest little scenario was, and how perhaps the healing of our fractured society might begin here, and that perhaps our most eloquent testimony to the truth of our religion is not in powerful sermons but children learning something about their own dignity and the absolute importance of kindness, courtesy and civility.

The young girl directly across from me, a sixth grader, spent most of her meal time taking care of the younger ones. She was mature beyond her years and had a wonderfully sparkling smile. I found myself wondering about her life, her prospects, thanking God for her and for the opportunity to share this meal with her. As the students were dismissed to meet with their tutors, I thought perhaps some grand gesture from me might be appropriate. "Would you like one of the flowers to take along with you?" I asked. She smiled a little shyly. "No" she said. "No thank you" showing me the red carnation she was holding in her lap. "I already took one."

It isn't all Christian faith and the Christian church is about, but it should and must be this, at least, a reflection in the world of something of the beauty and goodness of the one who created us; a reflection of something of the grace and kindness of Jesus, his courtesy. A civil religion.